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Pentagon

A Nose for News and Pseudo-News

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WASHINGTON, June 13 — About 10 o'clock this morning, press officers in the Defense Department put out telephone calls to newspaper, news service and television correspondents who regularly cover the Pentagon. The word: a session at 2 o'clock in the Pentagon press briefing room on updated estimates of Soviet military spending.

Asked who would give the briefing and under what ground rules, a press officer said he had been told to say only that it would be on "background" and that the source would be identified as "a senior defense official."

Urged to put the briefing on the record, with the name, title and affiliation of the source made public, Pentagon officials said the department wanted such information kept out of the news.

Intended to Influence

The Defense Department, like the State Department, the National Security Council and other agencies engaged in national security, often takes the initiative in trotting out officials to disclose information intended to influence policies under debate.

In this case, the Defense Department authorization bill, which approves Pentagon programs, has passed the House and is in the last throes of Congressional debate in the Senate. Consideration of the defense appropriation bill, which provides funds, has begun in committee.

So the briefing seemed intended to buttress arguments that Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger has often propounded, in Congressional testimony and other forums, that a continuing rise in Soviet military spending means the United States should spend more on the military.

With Congress already having cut the military budget proposed by the Administration and evidently in a mood to cut more, the Administration has been fighting a rear-guard action. Being able to cite information on increasing Soviet military spending would give Secretary Weinberger's allies in the Congress a sharp sword.

In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency have engaged in a long-running dispute over estimates of Soviet military spending. They agree that the Soviet Union spends a lot on its military forces and the amount rises each year. But they disagree on the rate of increase, the C.I.A. contend-

ing that it has slowed, the D.I.A. arguing that it has not. The agencies also differ on ways of calculating Soviet military expenditures, which are Herculean efforts since Moscow does not publish data that would help.

Few Got Really Excited

As it turned out, few news organizations got really excited by the briefing this afternoon. The Associated Press, United Press International and Reuters did not transmit reports until two hours or more after the briefing. They reported that the unnamed defense official had asserted that Soviet military production, after a lull, had begun to expand again on 18 lines that make weapons and would be up more than 5 percent in dollar value. The official denied that the briefing was linked to Congressional debate on the Administration's military budget.

In addition, news articles in Thursday issues of leading newspapers could be expected, as could short items on radio news. But television networks have seemed uninterested in the past, since Soviet spending figures do not lend themselves to striking visual display.

The New York Times declined to send a correspondent to today's briefing, telling the Pentagon press office that the session should be on the record because of its political implications.

In the past year, the Defense Department has twice invited reporters to background sessions in which officials of the C.I.A. and D.I.A. have candidly laid out their positions in an

effort to help correspondents understand the issues. But those sessions were genuinely for background, an effort to help reporters sort out the twists and turns of a complicated issue so that they would be in a position to help explain it when it became a matter of public debate.

In other cases, reporters have taken the initiative in asking officials to explain complicated issues. The officials have often agreed on condition that they, and sometimes their agencies, not be identified because they wanted to stay out of the public debate.

While the session today seemed to some reporters to have political overtones, the Pentagon, as have other departments in similar situations in the past, nevertheless imposed the rule that the source could not be named.

That meant that neither the Defense Department nor the office involved nor the official himself could be held accountable for the information dispensed. The Pentagon would have its version of the information reported without being subject to rebuttal.

This practice has become routine in Washington largely because news organizations, in most instances, have been unwilling to decline invitations to briefings and have only infrequently protested the ground rules.